

**GUIDANCE DOCUMENT RE REQUESTS FOR ADDITIONAL GRADUATION  
CREDIT REQUIREMENTS AND REQUESTS TO ALLOCATE ELECTIVES  
FROM LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS**

*JUNE 25, 1998*

*Introduction:*

This document sets forth those elements of information and decision which the Virginia Board of Education ("Board") intends to consider in reviewing applications from local school divisions requesting local additions to the statewide credits for graduation set forth in the Standards of Accreditation. It also provides information and guidance of general applicability to the staff and the public to interpret and implement the SOA provisions on graduation credit requirements.

*Statutory and Regulatory Background:*

The Standards of Quality ("SOQ"), which are statutory, state in pertinent part:

*Each local school board shall award diplomas to all secondary school students ... who earn the units of credit prescribed by the [Virginia] Board of Education ... and meet such other requirements as may be prescribed by the local school board and approved by the [Virginia] Board of Education ... Va. Code § 22.1-253.13:4.C (emphasis added).*

The Standards of Accreditation ("SOA"), which are regulations authorized by the SOQ and have the force of law, state in pertinent part:

*To receive a high school diploma, a student shall ... meet the minimum requirements for one of the two diplomas outlined [in the SOA]. These shall be the only requirements for a diploma, except that a local school board may prescribe additional requirements for a diploma if such requirements have been approved by the [Virginia] Board of Education. All additional requirements prescribed by local school boards and in effect as of June 30, 1997 are approved to continue through June 30, 1999, without further action by the Board. 8 VAC 20-131-50 (emphasis added).*

Under the SOA adopted by the Board of Education in September 1997, the statewide minimum number of course credits required to receive the Standard Diploma is twenty-two (22); the statewide minimum number required to receive the Advanced Studies Diploma is twenty-four (24).

The SOA states that the graduation credit requirements for the two types of diplomas authorized in the SOA (Standard and Advanced Studies) are *minimum* requirements. By its terms, the SOA graduation requirements are a floor, not a ceiling.

The SOA is consistent with historical practice. For many years in Virginia, local school divisions have regularly added local graduation credit requirements to the statewide minimum requirements. According to a survey recently completed by the Virginia Department of Education, currently forty-two (42) local school divisions have additional local credit requirements to obtain the Standard Diploma and *thirty-five* (35) local school divisions have additional local credit requirements to obtain the Advanced Studies Diploma.

Clearly, through the basic statute (the SOQ), the General Assembly and Governor have expressed their intent that local school divisions shall have some measure of flexibility to go beyond the minimum diploma requirements established by the Board in the SOA.

On the other hand, while both the SOQ and the SOA presume that the Board will approve *some* additional local graduation credit requirements, neither statute nor regulation gives local school divisions a blank check to add local credit requirements in whatever quantity and in any topic area they wish. If that had been the intent of the General Assembly and Governor, then the law would not give the Board the authority to approve local credit requirements.

In summary, neither the view that the SOA sets forth an absolute *maximum* number of graduation credits, beyond which local school divisions may not go under any circumstances, nor the opposite view that local school divisions can prescribe whatever additional local credit requirements they wish, is supported by Virginia law or historical practice. Both the SOQ and the SOA give the Board the authority and the duty to consider such local requests, which implicitly includes the authority and duty to approve some, but disapprove others.

The Board intends to act deliberately and cautiously, not arbitrarily, in considering such local requests. The purpose of this document is to give local school divisions, parents, students, and others advance notice and general guidance on how the Board will generally evaluate such local requests.

## **1. Local Additional Credits Required for Graduation**

*Observations and Considerations:* The Board is most concerned and will act most cautiously in evaluating requests from local schools divisions for local additions to the Standard Diploma requirements. The Standard Diploma is the basic diploma offered in Virginia public schools. Students who are seeking an Advanced Studies Diploma may fall short of its requirements, yet still graduate from high school with a Standard Diploma. However, students who fail to meet the requirements for a Standard Diploma will suffer the consequences of obtaining no diploma at all.

Virginia has just embarked on a nationally-recognized, sweeping reform initiative that will raise expectations for students, parents, teachers, administrators, schools and local school divisions as never before. Many in the public education community stated repeatedly in commenting on the new SOA prior to its adoption last year that reforms on such a scale should not -- and could not -- be done too hastily and should be phased in over many years to give all concerned time to adapt and prepare for such fundamental changes. The Board listened to those comments and responded by adopting a gradual phased-in schedule of implementation in which the new SOA will not be entirely in effect until the 2006-2007 school year.

Following the same principle, while the Board encourages local efforts to raise student expectations and academic standards higher as our new reforms are gradually phased in, we believe that local school divisions should concentrate on improving student achievement in the core academic disciplines for which the new Standards of Learning (SOL) tests are given (passage of which will become a statewide graduation requirement beginning with the Class of 2004), before seeking numerous and wide-ranging additional local credit requirements for the Standard Diploma.

The Board is much more willing to give a greater degree of flexibility to local school divisions who wish to add local credit requirements for the Advanced Studies Diploma, since students who fail to meet its requirements can still obtain the Standard Diploma.

#### *A. Standard Diploma*

##### *Guidance:*

**1. Generally, the Board will approve requests from local school divisions to require up to two additional local credits to obtain the Standard Diploma (maximum of 24 required credits).**

**Generally, the Board will approve local requests for additional graduation credit requirements in the core discipline areas of the Standards of Learning (English, mathematics, science or history/social studies).**

**For example, a local request to add one additional credit requirement in history and one in science would generally be approved, because that would not exceed a total graduation credit requirement of 24 and those credits are in the core disciplines.**

**Requests for additional local credits in disciplines outside the core discipline areas will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but the Board will proceed cautiously for the reasons outlined above. In evaluating requests for additional local graduation credits outside the core discipline areas, the Board generally may consider, among other criteria, a local school division's graduation and drop-out rates and its students' performance on the SOL tests.**

**2. Generally, if requested by a local school division which has local additional credit requirements that were "grandfathered" until June 30, 1999 under the SOA provision cited above, the Board will extend approval for such local additional credit requirements until June 30, 2000.**

## ***B. Advanced Studies Diploma***

### ***Guidance:***

Generally, the Board will approve requests from local school divisions for local additional credits required for the Advanced Studies Diploma above the 24 contained in the SOA if the credits are in the discipline areas of English, mathematics, science, history/social studies, fine arts (including performing arts) or practical arts (option), or foreign language. The Board will consider credits outside these disciplines on a case-by-case basis.

## ***C Transfer Students***

### ***Guidance:***

Any local school division receiving approval to increase its course credit requirements may not deny either the Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma to any transfer student who has otherwise met the requirements contained in the SOA, if the transfer student can only meet the division's requirements by taking a heavier than normal course load in any semester, by taking summer school, or by taking courses after the time when he or she otherwise would have graduated.

## ***D. Prospective Application Advance Notice***

### ***Guidance:***

**A local school division's additional credit requirements should apply only to students who have not yet entered high school at the time the additional credits are approved.**

## **2. Allocation of Electives**

*Observations and Considerations:* Some local school divisions have requested that they be allowed to allocate one or more of the SOA's elective credits for a prescribed credit, without raising the *total* number of credits required to graduate.

The current SOA set forth a 22-credit requirement for the Standard Diploma, of which 16 are prescribed and 6 are electives. For the Advanced Studies Diploma, the SOA requires 22 prescribed credits and 2 electives, for a total of 24.

In reality, however, the vast majority of Virginia students have far more opportunity to take electives than those contained in the SOA. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of local school divisions in Virginia are now on schedule configurations such as "block" that allow the student to earn eight credits per year, for a total opportunity of 32 credits in high school, plus any additional high school course credits that may have been earned in middle school.

More than one-fourth (27%) of Virginia local school divisions are on seven-period-day schedules, enabling the student to earn 28 credits in high school, plus credits towards graduation that may have been earned in middle school.

One-tenth (10%) of local school divisions are on six-period day schedules, enabling the student to earn 24 credits, plus credits towards graduation that may have been earned in middle school.

A student pursuing a Standard Diploma in a local school division on a block schedule has the opportunity to earn 32 credits in high school (plus credits earned in middle school), of which 16 are prescribed in the SOA and the rest are electives. While students in local school divisions on seven or six-period daily schedules have less opportunity for electives than the students in block schedules, nonetheless the Board believes there is ample room to allow local school divisions to allocate some elective credits as prescribed credits and still allow reasonable opportunity for student choice of other electives.

***Guidance:***

**1. Generally, the Board will approve requests from local school divisions to allocate elective credits for local prescribed course requirements, while reducing the number of electives by an equal amount so that the total number of graduation credit requirements remains unchanged.**

**For the Standard Diploma, generally the Board will approve allocations of electives to prescribed credits in the core discipline areas of English, mathematics, science, or history/social studies. Requests to allocate electives for prescribed credits outside of the core disciplines will be considered on a case-by-case basis.**

**For the Advanced Studies Diploma, generally the Board will approve allocations of electives to prescribed credits in the discipline areas of English, mathematics, science, history/social studies, fine arts (including performing arts) or practical arts (option), or foreign language. Requests to allocate electives for prescribed credits outside of these disciplines will be considered on a case-by-case basis.**

**Generally, in addition, a local school division may offer, as an option to students, the opportunity to pursue concentrated courses of study by taking related courses in a specialty area (for example, vocational education, fine or performing arts), or to choose to take a variety of elective courses. Offering such options shall not require Board approval so long as choosing a particular concentration of elective courses is not mandatory for graduation.**

**3. Requests for Different Types of Diplomas**

*Background and Considerations:* The only two types of diplomas authorized in the SOA are the Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas. The Board does not have the legal authority in the current SOA to create or authorize additional types of diplomas.

With the creative use of already existing authority to award diploma seals, however, including the newly-authorized Vocational Education Seal, and through the authority to create optional concentrated areas of study, local school divisions can achieve their objectives.

***Guidance:***

**The Board will not approve the issuance of diplomas other than the Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas.**

*Respectfully submitted to the Board*

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